

RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 14

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Welcome, Patrons!

Happy September, everybody. It's the end of summer, which for us at RollPlay means it's the end of the convention season and a return to a more regular schedule. In a lot of ways, I'm a stereotypical nerd, I prefer to keep indoors during the hot weather and look forward to the fall. The rain and the changing leaves, the chill in the air, it's all nicely contemplative. This month, we had the Nebula Jazz live show, which I hope you've had a chance to watch, and we finished up a significant arc for Court of Swords - saying goodbye to Anne's character, Ziva Tarkas and finishing up the PCs business in the House of the Falcon. In this issue, I'm going to share my prep and maps for that dungeon, as well as some notes about the Nebula Jazz live show and where Season 2 of that space weirdness is headed. Grab a cup of coffee, sit by the window and dig in!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 14 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM



THE NEBULA JAZZ LIVE SHOW



Fate, and by extension, Nebula Jazz's greatest strength is its ability to take off in unexpected directions. When I'm GMing a game like Dungeons & Dragons, the amount of prep and readiness expected of me is significant - I'll often generate encounters and maps, building an environment for the game to take place in. When the players enter that environment, there's chaos and unexpected action, to be sure, but it's constrained to the space I've created for the narrative to take place in. To a degree, that's true of Nebula Jazz - the "setting" of Nebula Jazz, more than the planets, cities and spaceships that act as a backdrop, is the overarching situation that's going on in the game. In our case,

the final showdown between the Elaxetronians, Jack and his Jacker Fleet and the terrible golden fury of the Minghassi Imperium. I'd set the stage, but from there out, it was pure improv.

A lot of the time I think game masters use prep as a way to alleviate the anxiety of play. There's this feeling that can develop (exacerbated by the text of a lot of roleplaying games) where we think that it's our job to make sure the game is fun for the players. That our job is to create a narrative that's engaging for everyone and that the player role is more passive, more reactionary. It's especially tricky when you have a situation in front of you that says

"you have a full eight hour day of content to prepare and be ready for, and if things slow down, or go weird, it's on you to keep it moving and under control". GM prep can help us feel like we're ready for that responsibility. It can give us tools to manage pacing and progress and while I'm firmly of the mind that fun is the responsibility of the whole group, I want to do as much as I can to make sure that fun is possible for the players. Not just the players, either, there's the reality that Nebula Jazz is more than a roleplaying game, it's a show. I want to make sure that our shows are exciting and engaging to watch - I want to make sure our audience is entertained, too. It's a lot of responsibility to handle, certainly, but in many ways, Fate does a great job breaking some of the over-preparation habits many GMs can fall into.

I really had no opportunity to prep for Nebula Jazz. The chaotic nature of the show's themes and style, the mechanically-enforced improvisational nature of the narrative itself and the flattened authorial hierarchy that FATE puts in front of us meant that all I could do to prep, really, was sit down and watch the last few episodes at double speed, make some notes, remember where all the relevant

NPCs were and then limber up my brain for some very serious mental gymnastics. With a game like FATE and a cast like the Nebula Jazz folks, all one can really do is hold on tight as the spaceship of wackiness hurtles through the galaxy.

To that end, I've included here the entirety of my prep for the Nebula Jazz live show. I think you'll see what I mean about it being sparse...

(I've also included a few of my behind-the-scenes photos from the set! Being on set with the cast, hanging out and prepping the live shows is always so delightful. One thing I've always loved about the RollPlay crew is that it feels so much like being around friends - even when someone new joins the cast, we eat dinner together the night before, hang out and talk, watch movies and work together while the last details of the show get sorted out. The energy the day before the show is a sort of subdued nervous excitement, and I love sitting at the table, making my last minute notes, listening to Erin, Scoots and JP working on the set in the background. It's a really magical experience to be a part of, and reminds me every time how much I love being able to help create RollPlay for y'all.)

NEBULA JAZZ "PREP"

- Nina the marsupial
 - duke mako ostarz of the minghassi imperium, regent of all
 - Jack opportunity Himself, King of the Jackers
 - SYBR (aka Gramps) head of the Elaxetronian Hivemind
 - the Ghost of Prince Novarius
 - Princess Idina, the Hybrid
 - Thuja Mayhem, Huntress of the Agara
 - David Hume (dave the human) - Raul?
 - Captain Slipnaught
 - Barkish the Jucker
 - Plamor the Elder (et al)
 - the Stranger
-

- 1) Nina is somewhere, following the PCs in secret.
 - 2) Thuja and the Princess are in hiding, the shockwave has injured the Princess gravely. (the wave is somehow lethal to the Minghassi half of her)
 - 3) Jack has a conversation with Aurora about "Jacking your destiny"
 - 4) the Elaxetronian hive fleet arrives - they need Aurora to destroy the Imperium, finally, because she's the only successful experiment and Qin destroyed the Library
 - 5) finally, the Minghassi
-

ACT ONE: Jackers
ACT TWO: the Elaxetronians
ACT THREE: Minghassi Arrival
ACT FOUR: the Climax
ACT FIVE: Aftermath

the elaxetronians
planted the seed
for human evolution
billions of years
ago.





AN EMOTIONAL REX

NEBULA JAZZ, SEASON 2



Nebula Jazz has a very strange aesthetic. Sometimes I think it's a bit of genius, the way we manage to merge jazz age with noir with 80s retro nostalgia and top it off with some four colour space goofiness. Other times, I think it's probably more a horrible mess. You win some, you lose some, right? That indefinable aesthetic is part, I think, of what makes it so much fun, the idea that there might be room for weird asides and digressions without violating the general whole of the thing. You might

have heard me talk before about the concept of GM-as-Creative-Director. Everyone on the team contributes to the narrative and the flavour but it's the role of the game master to keep things on the right path. Generally, I have a pretty good gut feeling about what is or isn't "on brand" for Nebula Jazz, but it's more like a Potter Stewart approach than any kind of proper understanding anyone else could follow. Making a style bible for Nebula Jazz would be very difficult. Just ask Erin how hard it was to set

dress the live show. We're finishing season one, and moving into season two, and I think that aesthetic might be the biggest challenge ahead of us. I can relatively easily create NPCs, manage plot hooks, help the players define their aspects and stunts, but making sure that it's all both fresh for the new season and familiarly "Nebula Jazz" is incredibly important and terribly challenging. I do love a challenge.

For season two of Nebula Jazz, there's a temptation to "go dark". Often that's what happens with sequels - the first one has a lighter, more interesting tone and then in an effort to get deeper into the world and the characters, we go dark like a 1990s comic book. Suddenly Rex smokes ten packs of death sticks a day and Aurora's got PTSD and Qin's dealing with institutional racism on Sylmn. That's a pretty common sequel trick, and it can work in varying degrees. The Empire Strikes Back is a great example of a dark sequel to a light series opening. Certainly, the characters and world seem to be leaning in that direction - Rex has a frozen princess in tow, in love with a woman he can't touch or talk to. Jesse's got a new character that's a world-killing artificial intelligence trapped in the chassis of a sexbot. Dodger is making the last son of

a species Rex helped eradicate and I can guarantee Pokket's mad scientist is not a good person. This team is a little less Guardians of the Galaxy and a little more Suicide Squad, but I'm hoping we don't go full Team Empire with this arc. Of course, that's a conversation I've had with the cast, and we can never fully know the pathways a game of FATE will take until we're down them most of the way, but I'm expecting we can temper that darkness with a sort of gallows humor, at least.

If the first season of Nebula Jazz was inspired by the Jazz Age, by Art Deco and a pinch of Noir, I'm thinking that this season we're going to go from the Roaring Twenties into the Great Depression. Real life history is my favourite sourcebook - there's a massive source of interesting plot hooks and developments that are available just by looking at the familiar (and unfamiliar) aspects of our own world. For me, the stuff I'm interested in is the sort of collapse-of-empire vibe that comes with a sudden downturn. In season one, the Minghassi Imperium was wiped out, most of their citizens dying in a terrible, sudden technomagical plague. There are whole planets abandoned, and with the dominant species suddenly cut out of the food chain, the scavengers are all

left to their own devices. I imagine a universe run by mobsters, gangsters and other ne'er do wells, with a few folks trying to do right while Rome continues to burn. I think it's going to be a story about Hard Times and salt of the uhhh, earth folk suffering. The idea of trying to build something new out of the ashes. Not quite post apocalyptic but close. I'm fascinated by the rise of Al Capone and the structures of organized crime, and how mob stories of Elliot Ness and the Untouchables might inform my storytelling. There's no shortage of bitter, angry folks when things

are hard, and finding villains and adversaries should be easy enough, too.

Whether you're running a space opera or a fantasy adventure game, there's so much to be had by pillaging the real world and her history for details. I'm going to dig into the dirty thirties, and if you have anything you think would make for a cool source of plot hooks or NPC ideas, send it my way! Music, movies, tv shows, books - I want 'em all!



COURT OF SWORDS THE HOUSE OF THE FALCON

The House of the Falcon is a lot like the Lair of the Rock Gnome King in terms of overall map design - I chose segments of maps in Roll20, building the vault out of matching bits and pieces. In a lot of ways, designing dungeons in Roll20 is less about having a perfect plan for a space and then creating it in the VTT and more about using what's available in the VTT to assemble the map and then bending your concept around it, which requires a bit more flexibility on the creative end. For example, the enormous hunting trophy dragon skeleton in the final room was never something I had expected to use, but finding it in my library, it seemed like a great call, and helped me design some of the other aspects of the map.

One thing that's very different from what I might ordinarily do with a map like this is the lack of presupposed encounters. Instead of designing a dungeon whose inhabitants had set locations, I chose instead to set up some encounter tables (you can find those slightly later in the zine) and then, as the players wandered from room to room, I rolled which thing was up next and dropped it into the dungeon from a present token collection screen, building the encounter essentially under cover of darkness to reveal as the players entered the room or hallway and discovered it.

A lot of audience members noticed and commented on the "OSR*" style feel of many elements of the dungeon.

The House of the Falcon had timed random encounters and several “puzzles” that could only be solved using an old-school methodology of narrating specifically what your character was doing - were you searching using only your eyes? Were you touching the wall? How close did you get to that ominous statuary? This can be a nice contrast to a dungeon getting boiled down to a series of Investigation rolls with advantage plus Guidance.

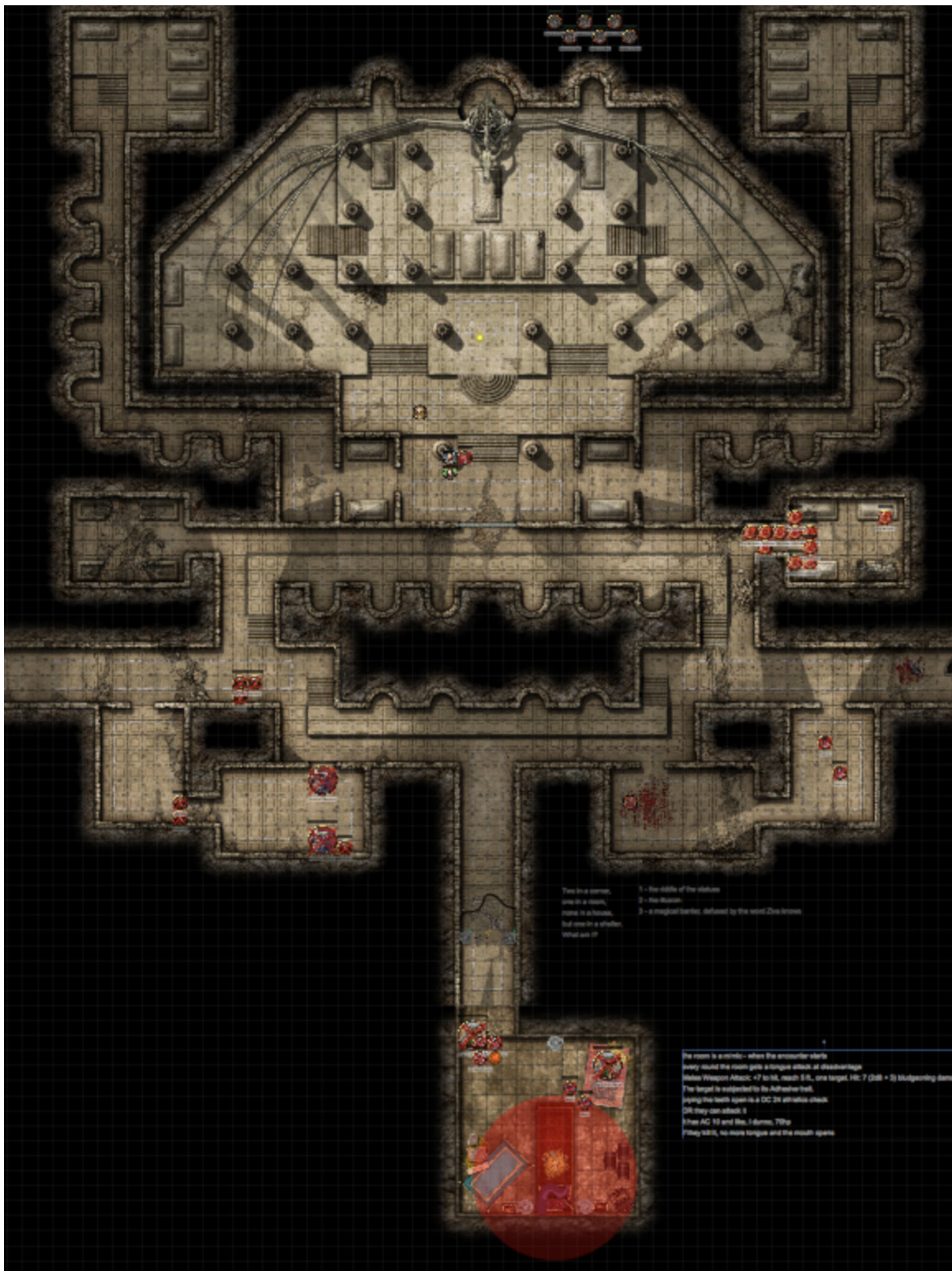
So, a little something different for the House of the Falcon, presented here for your perusal. I hope you’ll find a place in your home campaign for a mimic full of mimics.

* OSR is “old school renaissance” and refers to a style of gameplay and design that has its origins in elder editions of Dungeons & Dragons, prevalent among them the Moldvay edition of Basic D&D



A full overview of my design process for the House of the Falcon can be found here, if you want to watch me assemble it pseudo-live: youtu.be/IywnEnXWNSQ





COURT OF SWORDS

THE HOUSE OF THE FALCON ENCOUNTER TABLES

You'll need to either scavenge up some weird non-platonic solids to roll on this table, or use an online number generator like the roller in Roll20.

Feel free to use these randomly to assemble your own House of the Falcon or pick and choose from the selection and pre-design the House the way you prefer it. As you can see, there were lots of options we never saw on screen - the House could have been very different!

1	The Lord of the House
2-5	A Pack of Undead

6-9	Defenders of the Catacombs
10-13	Hungry Vermin
14-15	Tomb Robbers
16	Wandering Madman

The Lord of the House

If you get this encounter out in the hallways of the House, the Lord is alone, wandering somberly through the vault. He'll respond to violence with violence, but prefers to fight alongside his Wastrels, so he'll retreat after a round or two.

The Lord of the House is a standard Vampire from the Monster Manual.

His Wastrels are Vampire Spawn, but with the caveat that their hp regeneration will occur any round that the Lord of the House still lives, even if they're below 1hp.

A Pack of Undead

Skeleton Crew

A Bone Naga (spellcaster variant), 2 minotaur skeletons and as many regular skeletons as you feel might be a challenge to round out the encounter. The Bone Naga is an entity drawn here by the wicked charisma of the House and its Lord, and who serves out of a sense of curiosity. It'll attack from the shadows, letting the Minotaur and skeletons do the grunt work, and will slip away if it's at all possible. Play this one as cheap as you like, throwing lightning bolts from the darkness, being hard to pin down, etc. The Naga can always get more bone servants from the crypts.

Ghastly Servants

A pack of six ghasts who dwell in the vault during the day and sneak up above ground at night, these foul creatures are a plague on the district surrounding the house. They're part of the reason the neighborhood has gone so foul. They can be found in vault any time during the day, or at

your discretion, during the night, coming home with bellies full of flesh or just rising for their evening hunt. They're savage and near mindless, but have an animal instinct. They'll stalk the PCs through the halls, though their foul scent might give them away.

A Ghost

A single ghost, the spirit of someone once beloved by the Lord, perhaps his first victim in the initial nights of his transformation. This person, whoever you decide them to be, is more the "sad forlorn I wish I had a body" type of ghost and less the "screaming menace" type. There might be room for the PCs to negotiate some secret or help from the spirit in exchange for their help righting the wrong that keeps them here - their murder at the hands of the Lord of House.

Defenders of the Catacombs

Stone Golem

An ancient guardian built to protect this place. He'll be heard lumbering along well before he's seen. He cannot be bargained with or reasoned with, but if the PCs could convince him that they've a legitimate reason to be in the dungeon or that they're long lost relatives, etc, they might be

able to avoid a deadly encounter.

Gargoyles

A group of six gargoyles, whose form is a hybrid human / falcon style. They're loyal members of the guard who, upon death, were transformed into these loyal servants. They do the master's bidding outside the crypt - serving as his eyes and ears in the area, but can be found in the vault either asleep in their rookery or on their way home from a night of service. They're vicious and dedicated guardians, who'll attack intruders and alert the Lord to their presence with loud shouts and ruckus.

Hungry Vermin

Rust Monsters

A dozen rust monsters. Because sometimes we have to be cruel to be kind.

Garbage Room

Three carrion crawlers and an otyugh. I had planned this encounter to be a sort of trash room, where the local sewer system had broken through into the crypt, dragging all sorts of rot and ruin into the place, a sunken chamber full of sludge and muck. I didn't end up using it in the final dungeon, but it would be a great

place to insert a secondary entrance and exit from the vault, guarded by these icky beasts.

Exploding Flesh Golem

A flesh golem, full of rot grubs that turns into a black pudding when it dies. Probably some kind of failed experiment, magic gone wrong or a butler, horribly cursed alongside his master. Put a little bowler hat on him. It'll be cute until the worms he's full of burrow into your heart and you die. I love encounters that shift and change as you go - it's something I miss about 4e D&D - monsters that change when they're bloodied. I think we need more of that stuff. Enrage timers are fun, right?

Tomb Robbers

A party of rival adventurers, out for treasure. They can likely be bargained with or threatened, but they'll fight if they're forced to. Basically, just a bunch of filthy murder hobos out to make it rich. I always love putting the adventurers up against their own, because it's such a fun way to hold a mirror up to their behaviour. This band is a knight, a master thief, an illusionist, a priest and two thugs. All from the Monster Manual.

Wandering Madman

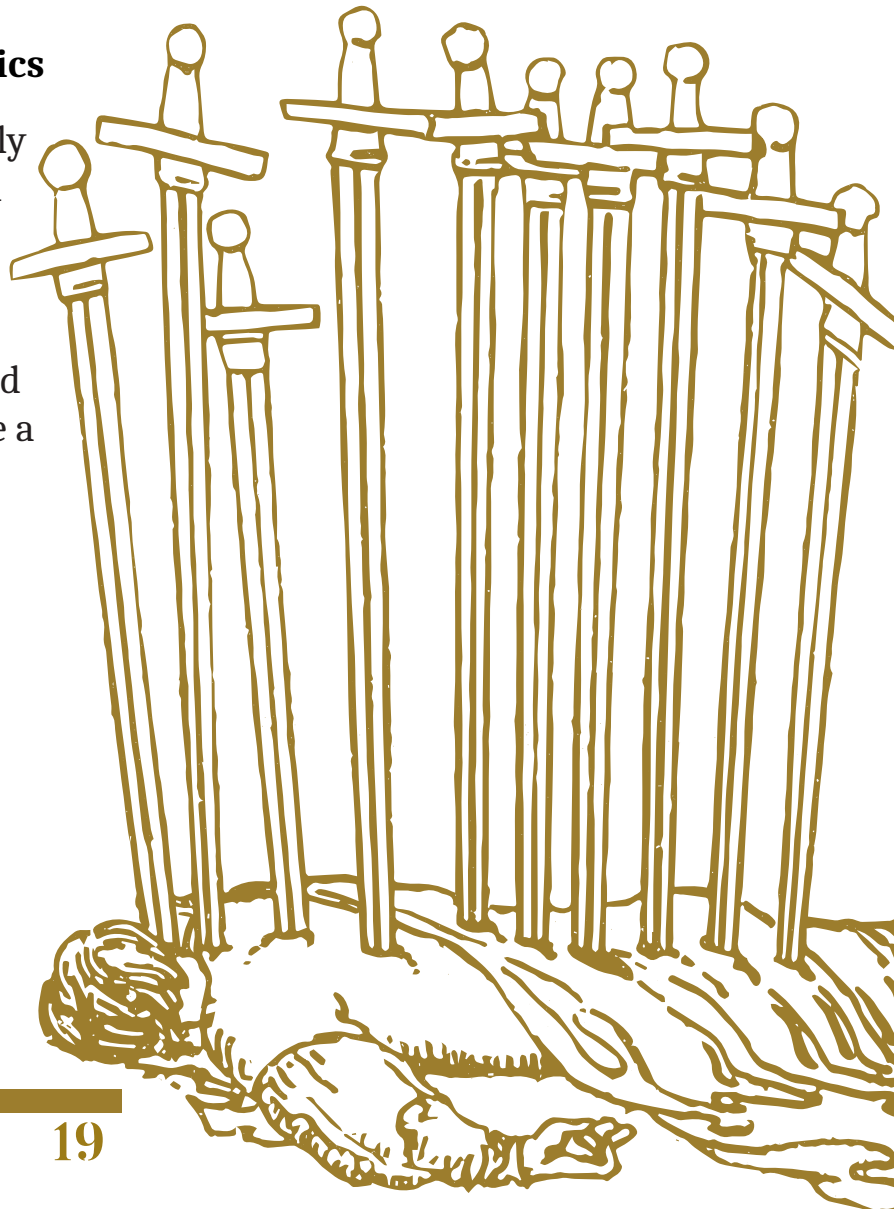
In our version of the House, a lost trader from the Scarlet Banner company, his mind gone, trapped in a ruin of madness and this dark place. A good opportunity to show that not everything down here is a horrible monster out to get them, and a source of expository goodies if you're willing to cut through the rambling. In your adventure, they might be more hostile, or secretly a sort of Renfield figure for the Lord. Always fun to have an encounter that isn't "will this kill me before I kill it" right away.

Special: The Mimic Full of Mimics

Basically, I just built a deadly encounter of all the animated crap I could find in the Monster Manual, and added that they're inside the gullet of a huge room-shaped mimic. The room itself had 70hp, an AC of 10 and could make a

single attack on anyone in range of its tongue every turn. It was a mimic in every other respect, and when it died, the body started to dissolve, dealing damage to everyone in the room for three turns before it dissolved completely.

Fun stuff. For added pleasure, throw in an illusory item you know your players really really want and then have it dissolve like sugar in a teacup before their eyes.



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SWAN SONG

"It tastes like blood..."

– Wilbur Higgins III

Swan Song: Episode 1, Season 2

- ① Start in on the three PCs in a shitty jail cell. Titles say Wednesday, June 28th, 3200.
Taxila Station, Tover system. Pan across to Higgs, titles read: 25th

"Wilbur Higgins III aka 'Jeb' aka ct 21
CRIMES: public drunkenness, lewd behaviour, brawling"

<ASK JP what Higgs is doing in jail right now.>

"Mr. Sicarian, formerly of Pfotenbauer Mercenary Society
CRIMES: assault, battery, murder"

<Ask Geoff>

"Piani Pic, cybercriminal, AI mom
CRIMES: assault, battery, impersonating a disabled person"

<Ask Wheat>

A scruff looking guard comes in, clears his throat and says "okay, y'all. looks like the guanxi's been paid. you can go." another man steps out from behind him

"Prosper Treandean, last sane man on Tatila"

(Connor Wu) ^{mechanic}
@TAXILA

- ② The situation on Taxila; X4

- the Swan Song will take 9 days to fully repair and gear up
- Heather wants a) to get revenge on the crew for killing Igor and b) to get her ship (the Taylor Swift) off the station with her stolen goods bound for Andoni. She goes to some local madari goons for both.
- Revered Brother ~~Kanda~~ ^{Toshio} of the Purity Initiative approaches the Song, telling Sicarian they have heard what he did in the bar and they want to help his "crusade" against corruption. If Sicarian agrees, he offers his (and the Purity Initiative's) aid. If he doesn't, they start a guerilla war against the local Madari (damaging the station dramatically in the mean time.)

- ③ Off Taxila;

- Mr. Titan is torturing OL prisoners on Onintza
- Kalaya is looking for Higgs, slowly honing in
- the universe keeps spinning

owns
runs
Mustafa Li, a madari boss
Brother ~~Kanda~~ ^{Toshio}, a Purity monk
the White Rose, a gambling hall
the Universal Prosperity Org, a
"wellness center"

Swan Song GM Notes

Commentary

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Episode 1, Season 2

These season markers were absolutely arbitrary, and honestly, even now in the current shows seem to be based on wherever we think a season end will fall - a live show, a big event in the narrative, a tpk. Seasons last a variety of episodes in length, but help me to get a handle on what the themes or narrative notes of each arc might be. I remember this arc “starting” because of the introduction of Prosper Trudeau. That’s always a good place to put a flag in the ground and in RPGs, the entry of a new character is often also the exit of an old one.

Crime Time

It’s funny that this is the only time the crew was ever incarcerated. With everything that happened, you’d maybe expect them to have spent more time in jail, though I suppose Asgard Sigma, being all about that private security / anarcho-capitalist dystopian military state situation, handles criminals slightly more aggressively than trying to rehabilitate them in prison. I particularly like “lewd behaviour” which in this case was “having sex in a public bathroom” and “continuing the Higgins line” which I think is probably a worse crime than anything else perpetrated here.

Connor Wu

Hey buddy. Welcome to the crew. /sadface

Purity on Taxila

I always loved the Purity Initiative - they had a kind of hypocritical hyperfocus that I was always excited to portray on the show. I feel like of all the factions, they had the most depth in terms of individuals and their agendas. Some folks were supremely hardline and devoted, others just wanted, you know, drugs off the streets and cyborgs in the asteroid mines where they belong, you know?

Mustafa Li

Another important NPC introduced on Taxila - I'd forgotten that this was his origin point, and the start of the arc that would tie the ship, Connor and the Madari together for the next little while. I was always super impressed at how the players managed to navigate the syndicate war, leveraging Mustafa, Kalaya and Rajani against one another. The Swan Song cast was always really good at playing the sandbox the way I'd wanted it to be played. The best part of a motivated crew is just being able to say "here's the world, kids, make of it what you will" and have them excitedly pursue their goals.

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